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COMMUNICATIONS RESPECTING THE CASSIA TRIBE,

By T. OLDHAM, Esq., F.G.S., GEOLOGIST TO THE INDIAN SURVEY.

Extracted from a Letter to Dr. R. G. LATHAM, dated Calcutta, 29th April 1852.

Read 10th November, 1852.

LAST summer we spent in the hills north of Sylhet, amongst the tribes called the Kassia, Cossia, or Khasiya, for it is indifferently spelt in all these ways.

To one remark of yours, tending to identify or approximate the Kassias and other Aracanese tribes, I must say Nay. You say (p. 32 “The Varieties of Man”)—“In the Kasia country the occurrence of erect pillars, evidently objects of mysterious respect, if not of adoration, is frequent. They are explained by similar ones in the Khyen district. They are depicted by Lieutenant Latter—*accurate magis quam verecunde*—and are lingams.”

Now there is not a single stone even remotely representing the organs of generation among the Kasias; nor are they, as far as I can discover, at all disposed to pay any respect to such embodiments of the generative principle. Their religion is obscure. The principal portion of it consists in the adoration of *Boots*, or Spirits, which they believe to dwell in, and to possess, trees, stones, rivers, &c. To these they offer chiefly lime, one of the condiments they eat with pawn, simply smearing it on the trees or stones as they pass. Thus you will see a large stone, by the very side of some large projecting mass of rock, (whose overhanging shade may have instilled feelings of gratitude for the protection it afforded, or whose dark and gloomy loneliness may have inspired feelings of awe,) covered with these white finger marks, crossing and re-crossing it in every direction.

I have frequently seen my men make this offering, if offering it can be called, for they appeared to me generally to make the tree or rock serve the same purpose as a napkin

would with a civilized Christian, to wipe their fingers on, after they had taken good care to help themselves to the best portion of the lime ; but I cannot say that I ever saw them repeating any form of prayer, or otherwise offering any adoration.

They have some indistinct notion of a Supreme Power, and of future punishments and rewards. Their heaven is a place where pawn is abundant, and lime and betel-root easily to be obtained. Their hell is an abode of the damned, in which they suppose the wicked are placed, immersed up to their arm-pits in human ordure. These punishments are not, however, supposed to be eternal, but a man passing through this purgatory may attain to the happy region, or those above may be plunged into the filth as a punishment for deeds done after death.

But although they reverence and even worship rocks in this way, these rocks must not in any way be confounded with the standing stones to which you refer. Those to which adoration is paid are invariably *natural*, the others invariably erected by man. The latter, though not truly sepulchral, are, in all cases, *monumental* ;—In the case of wealthy persons, put up to the honour and name of a single person ; with persons less wealthy, put up by a family (unitedly) to the honour and name of their ancestors “departed this life.”

They are essentially of two kinds, for which they have distinct names,—one a monument of three standing stones, the other of five. These are often combined, and thus rows of 6, 8, 10, 11, 13, 14, 16, &c., stones are formed, these rows being made up of separate monuments of different numbers.

The stones are generally flat slabs of considerable size, and vary much in their form, dependent on the locality in which they occur, and the rocks to be found there. Where the rock is sandstone they are generally well cut and squared ; where of slaty rock or granite they are rude unhewn pillars. In front of these standing pillars is a cromlech-like erection, consisting of a flat stone or stones, supported on small upright ones. These form the general resting-places of the people as they pass along, and are, for the most part, on or close to the

lines of road through the hills ; indeed, I may say invariably so ; as, where they do not appear so at present, it arises from the line of road having been changed by the removal of a village, &c.

The Kassias, as you mention, do not drink milk, though they keep large herds of cattle for the sake of their manure : they eat the beef. Pig is, however, their favourite meat ; and pigs are sacrificed at every feast or festival. I could not trace that they had any fixed days for feasts, any holy days, which are so amazingly numerous among the Bengalees. They do not distil, but make a large quantity of fermented liquors, and delight in getting *mellow*. They are great *gamblers*, few of their villages being without regular houses specially devoted to this purpose.

The children of the parent never inherit, the nephew being invariably the heir—that is, the sister's child ; and the husband invariably leaves his home and his village, and goes to reside with the wife in her village. The marriage ceremony is very simple, and readily performed : the divorce is equally facile. In fact, the man walks away, and the wife is at liberty to take unto herself another husband. There is a less amount of immorality than among the Bengalees. The Kassias burn their dead, preserving the bones and ashes, and these are sometimes (when the family is wealthy) burned a second or even a third time, each occasion being an excuse for a great feast and gathering. Their dances are confined to these occasions, as far as I could learn, and are really very curious and interesting. They wear a peculiar dress, never usual at any other time, occasionally highly ornamental and very expensive, are decorated with silver embroidery, and gold chains, &c., and little embroidered tunics of velvet or silk, of various colours. The dance itself, as far as the motion is concerned, is very monotonous, and the music equally so. A curious fact connected with this, and which, as yet, I cannot account for, is this, that they have the most perfect jig and reel tunes I ever listened to out of Ireland and Scotland,—the most lively, inspiring airs, with the same wild changes which a Scotch reel has, from the true reel to the strathspey,—but to these airs they never dance. Whence came this music ?

It is altogether, in its spirit and character, distinct from the true Indian airs, and equally so from the monotonous dance music of the Kassias themselves, or the wild but melodious airs which they sing. There are many other points of interest about them, to which, however, I have not now time to refer; but, if you think it worth while, I will send you a more detailed statement.

The language, however, is the best clue to their position ethnologically; and as this may enable you to fix some main points regarding their position, I have got together a vocabulary containing a good many words. I am not aware of any published vocabulary of the Kassia, at least of any extent. I have about 500 words already; but as, while I am writing, it has become more than probable that I shall return to the Kassia hills this summer, I shall not copy these for you at present, but send you the full list at another time. I here give you their numerals. The system is a decimal one.

1. Kanee.*	11. Kud owè.
2. Ash.	12. „ ash.
3. Laee.	13. „ laee.
4. Sowh.	14. „ sowh.
5. Sungh.	15. „ sungh.
6. Heureeoo.	16. „ heureeow
7. Henneeow.	17. „ henneeow.
8. Phràh.	18. „ phràh.
9. Kundae.	19. „ kundae.
10. Sheepow	20. Ash phan.
30. Laee phan.	
40. Sauh phan.	
50. Sungh phan, &c.	
100. Shee spah.	
200. Ash spah.	
300. Laee spah, &c.	
1000. Shee pan spah.	

* I think there is some mistake in making *kance* = one, as the system is decimal, and eleven = ten one (*kud owè*), the word *owè* is one. There may, however, be two words for “one,” viz. *kanee* and *owè*. Is the word *shee* another synonym for “one”? See the numbers ten and one hundred —R. C., *Hon. Sec.*

As far as careful inquiries would satisfy me I was perfectly satisfied of the monosyllabic character of the language. Last year, however, being fresh in the country, I could not speak the language ; and being always obliged to converse with the Cassias through the medium of the Hindostanee, I was not able to get as much information from them as I could have done under other circumstances. I shall be better off this year, and shall endeavour to correct any mistakes, and to add to my stock of words and phrases. I cannot help thinking, however, that you will find the *Garó* tribe much more nearly allied to the Kassias, Kukis, Kachari, and Manipuri, than with the Bodo or Dhimal.